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WHY I AM A PRESBYTERIAN

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Romans 13:8-10, Mark 2:18-22

"No one puts new wine into old wineskins..." -Mark 2:22 (NRSV)

Why I am a Presbyterian ... It is sometimes said that the trouble with most religion is that it is busy providing answers to questions nobody is asking ...

If I am sure of anything this morning it is that few people lie awake asking, "Why is he a Presbyterian?"

And yet — it is an interesting and critical moment for religious denominations in this country. Are they anachronisms, phenomena which emerged out of a particular historic situation and which now need to fade away? Or, are they of permanent value? Is there something about Presbyterianism, Methodistism, Lutheranism that needs preserving and deserves celebrating?

It is, by the way, Reformation Sunday for Protestants and, for all Christians, the week of All Saints Day, when the church has always looked back and enjoyed and revived its memory and something of its identity ...

So, indulge me please and think with me about what may be a question of some merit: Why Presbyterianism?

For the record I'm a Presbyterian because my parents were. I was baptized in a Presbyterian Church, attended Sunday School, was confirmed, participated in youth fellowship and church camp. Presbyterianism is almost as deeply a part of who I am as my name.

But I am also a Presbyterian because I chose to be. When I left the basic structures of life — family and community — I also left my church for a while and wandered around in the wilderness, trying to decide who I was and who I wanted to be. And I discovered what many of us discover in that particular wilderness, namely that while our family may not be the most wonderful family in the world, it is our family and there is much about it that is admirable. And so with my church, from the outside looking in, it appeared different, stronger, more attractive than it did from the inside looking out, not unlike Noah's Ark, I suppose, to which the church is often likened and about which someone quipped that the stench inside is sometimes so bad that leaving sounds like a good idea, except for the fact that there is a storm outside and a person could easily drown.

In any event, after a serious flirtation with another ecclesiastical tradition, and an even more serious consideration of the most politically correct option — the time being the 1960s — namely a complete rejection of institutional religion as hypocritical and oppressive, I came back to where I had started, reclaimed my tradition, or rather claimed it authentically for myself, and asked the Presbyterian Church if it would have me.

In June of 1963 I was home again, for the first time, now a minister of Word and Sacrament and the symbol of that decision — my decision to be a Presbyterian and the Presbyterians to allow me in — is these two white strips of cloth we wear on Sunday. Not all Presbyterian ministers wear them by the way. But Fourth Church clergy always have, and I always have. They are sometimes called "preaching bands," or "Geneva tabs." They are said to represent the two foundations of Calvinism — The Law and the Grace of God. I don't know about that. What they mean to me is Geneva, where this church, this tradition, my family — that I am grateful and proud to number my self among — began. Geneva tabs remind me weekly of who I am and of this unique religious tradition called Reformed/Presbyterian which I claim as my own.

And yet, even that — that personal loyalty to a particular religious tradition — is a bit of an anachronism, is it not?

Brand loyalty, denominational orientation, does not rank very high when people choose a church. Ask a group of Presbyterians anywhere why they are members of a particular congregation and they will say things like, "It's close, we like the music, the children's program, the preaching, the people, the building, my wife or husband or parents make me go." Almost no one says, "I belong because it's Presbyterian." The same is true for Methodists, United Church of Christ and to an extent, Episcopalians.

Interestingly, denominations originally served to preserve ethnic or national identity for immigrants to the new world. As national and ethnic identity receded, denominations in this culture took on a new function. In 1929 H. Richard Niebuhr wrote a classic study called "The Social Sources of Denominationalism" which observed that there was a religious social hierarchy. Vance Packard wrote about it in his famous 1959 book *The Status Seekers.* He referred to "the long road from Pentecostal to Episcopal." Based on income, people might move from Pentecostal to Baptist to Methodist to Presbyterian to Episcopal, the top of the heap economically.

But even the social function of denominations is now gone. The old social hierarchy is gone. Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney are two sociologists who study religion. In their widely read *American Mainline Religions* they describe our numerical decline and then include a hilarious *Wall Street Journal* feature article written by Jack Cashill.

> "My strategy is to consolidate the various name brands, even the strong, flagship brands like Southern Baptist, into one identifiable Exxon-like entity. The target audience here is Mom, Dad, Butch and Sis — solid suburban Americans who want a little God in their life and a place to go before brunch. And, after test-marketing various possibilities, I have decided on the name Middle American Christian Church, or MacChurch for ad purposes. [Jack Cashill, *Wall Street Journal,* 7/30/85, in Roof and McKinney, p. 229]

Cashill, an advertising executive, created a marketing plan for revitalizing the major religious faiths. Judaism, he said, definitely needs a new product for Baby Boomers; for Roman Catholics a market-segmentation approach: "'RC Light' for liberals, 'RC Classic' for traditionalists, 'RC Free' for those interested in liberation theology." Protestantism presents special problems: individual churches will have to understand that there is only so much theological shelf space, that product differentiation is not viable for go-as-you-please Protestants; thus the Middle American Christian Church or "MacChurch." [*Ibid*]

Product differentiation is not very important. It never really was intended to be. The theological differences between Presbyterians, Methodists, Lutherans, United Church of Christ, Baptists are minimal. We differ in the way we go about being a church but there are no substantive differences in our beliefs. The same is true between Protestants and Catholics. The fundamentals are the same. We believe in God the creator, and Jesus Christ as God's incarnation, and the work of the Spirit in the world, and the Christian vocation to be faithful and to live in the love of Christ.

So, when someone says, "tell me what Presbyterians believe," the answer is the same thing as Methodists or Baptists or Catholics believe: the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Our own new member statistics indicate that product differentiation is no longer very important at all. In the five months between June and October, we received 110 new members: only 23, one in five, were Presbyterians.

What does differentiate between churches is the ethos, the style, the mission priorities and the matter of authority — who has it and how it is exercised. And so bear with me as we think about who we are.

We began in the middle of the Sixteenth Century, about thirty years after Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Roman Church and started the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin was a French lawyer who was interested in Reformation thinking, was exiled from France, settled in Geneva, Switzerland, wrote one of the most important theological and political works ever produced, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* became a Reformed pastor, and was persuaded by the Geneva political powers to settle there and to organize the church and the city according to the new principles he had been writing about. So he did and the result was a new way of being a church: he, pardon the expression, was one of the great "re-imaginers" of all time!

Calvin imagined a church whose authority was not in its hierarchy but its people. That was a revolutionary idea, a dangerous and radical idea in the political arena. Calvin said that not only does the individual have the right to participate in the process by which authority is exercised, both ecclesiastical and civil, no authority has the right to coerce the individual's conscience. God alone is Lord of the conscience.

And furthermore, said Calvin, the individual who has rights and authority needs to be educated, to be able to read and reason and so it is one of the primary responsibilities of civil authority, not just wealthy families, to educate the young.

And, he said, truth leads to goodness; religious faith is to be expressed, not just in personal morality and piety, but in responsible and compassionate and just political action.

And so there is a Presbyterian ethos, a style, a way of being a church.

Authority here is not in the hierarchy, but the people who elect representatives: elders. A Presbyterian particular is to be very suspicious of authority which is not representative. A minister can't make many decisions without the Session. We have no bishops and we get nervous when anyone starts acting like one. We call our highest officers Moderator and Clerk, not terribly exalted titles.

And this matter of conscience. The Sons and Daughters of John Calvin have been everywhere on the side of liberty in the political arena. It was an important moment for me when in freshman government I had to read John Calvin on the principles of liberty. John Knox, a disciple of Calvin, took Presbyterianism back to Scotland and fomented a revolution which resulted in freedom of religion and conscience. Presbyterians were here, on this continent, in 1640 and by the time of the American Revolution had strongly sided with the patriot cause. William Pitt, on the floor of Parliament called the skirmish in the colonies "the Presbyterian revolt." The only clergy to sign the Declaration of Independence was one of ours, John Witherspoon, minister and President of the College of New Jersey. You will find the Presbyterian Church pressing for personal freedom all along the often controversial political spectrum. We were deeply involved in the civil rights movement; we are historically opposed to any government coercion of conscience; we are for the dignity and rights of individuals to determine their own destiny.

And education: the majority of the colleges in the colonies and post-colonial period were started by Presbyterians and other Reformed churches; and across the country, some sixty colleges and universities today are still related to the Presbyterian Church. Lake Forest, Millikin, Monmouth in Illinois.

One of our very distinguished theologians, Edward Farley, says,

> "If we have a genius it is not so much some distinctive deposit of doctrine as it is a way of transcending our deposited traditions under the constant nagging pressure of the question of truth." [*The Presbyterian Predicament,* p. 52]

Because we believe so passionately in the sovereignty of God and the human conscience, we believe the question of truth is an open one and that we are called to seek the truth with our minds and hearts and spirits. We believe that science and academic inquiry are holy pursuits, never, never the enemy of religion.

One of the great moments in the history of this congregation in fact, was when David Swing, one of its pastors in the years after the Civil War, was tried for heresy by the Presbytery of Chicago for saying that "Church confessions were not deposits of absolute truth but statements having a useful function for a specific time and situation." The Presbytery exonerated him.

Our heritage:

- individual rights and responsibilities in church and world;
- the pursuit of truth and the life of the mind, commitment to education;
- commitment to the life of faith in the world.

I believe this is a precious and important inheritance and that the life of the world, the nation, the community, would be immeasurably poorer without them. You will not hear much about that kind of religion on televison. How tragic if mindless piety, not open to new truth, were all the culture ever heard about Christianity.

Farley thinks, and I believe, that the phrase that best describes us is "critical modernism."

We accept science — scientific inquiry, not as the only arbiter of truth, but as a gift of God and a human responsibility.

We are not Biblical literalists. We believe it is critically important to engage in historical analysis of the Bible. We shouldn't hide that or be ashamed of it. We should celebrate it and teach our children that the truth of scripture is accessible to the human intellect when it is doing what it does best — challenge, probe, question.

And we are "modernists," a word often used as a criticism. We live in this world. Our hearts and minds and bodies belong to God, but we live in the year 1994, and frankly we are far more concerned about the future than we are about the past — the world we are giving to our children and grandchildren, than the world of our grandparents.

And I'm a Presbyterian because I choose to stand in a line of others who have faithfully witnessed to God's love and grace in Jesus Christ and the consequent social and political imperatives.

I'm a Presbyterian because of the witness of my church in the world. I am a member of our church's Board of Pensions. We met last week in California and while there visited a retirement facility for mission personnel at Duarte. We own the facility because retired missionaries don't have much of anything: no home, no equity, often no furniture and no savings. I was deeply touched.

I met and talked with a woman who with her husband had taught for forty years at the American University in Beirut, a very critical university started by her husband's great-grandfather, a Presbyterian missionary in the 1860s. Her husband was a fourth generation Presbyterian mission worker to teach at American University. (Chicago Bulls' guard Steve Kerr is the son of the distinguished President of American University, Clark Kerr, who was assassinated by terrorists some years ago.)

And I was hosted on our visit by Ralph and Florence Galloway, who worked for forty years in Central Africa. He as a pastor and linguist who spent his life developing written language for tribal people whose dialect was only spoken and who therefore had no way to communicate with the outside world. She, a public health nurse, specializing in family planning and women's reproductive health issues. They were proud of their first refrigerator and a computer.

And I ate dinner with old friends, Dr. and Mrs. Norval Christy; he an eye surgeon, she his nurse and surgical assistant. At the Presbyterian hospital in Taxila, Pakistan, Dr. and Mrs. Christy developed cataract surgery techniques that allowed their team of Pakistanis to do 150 cataract operations a day, every day. People from all over the world came to watch and learn. "What's going on in Taxila these days," I asked. Dr. Christy doesn't talk much. "They do it now," he said. "Who," I asked. "They do, my Pakistani doctors. I trained seven of them and they are expanding the clinic." "Christians," I asked. "Yes, all seven."

I'm a Presbyterian because I love this family and what it means and does. In Beirut, Pakistan and Zaire ... in great American churches like Nassau Presbyterian in Princeton, Fifth Avenue in New York, Peach Tree in Atlanta, in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, Denver, Dallas, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago — large, faithful, robust, lively Presbyterian churches in the city; and in Decatur, Alton and Springfield — more than 11,000 congregations in the United States. And here in Chicago at 64th and Kimbark, First Presbyterian, and Second Church at Michigan and 20th; 130 congregations in and around the city, a new congregation in Hoffman Estates, a store front in Humboldt Park; the Center for Whole Life in Cabrini-Green, and children tutored and houses built and homeless fed. God's love expressed in the world by Presbyterian Churches and individual Presbyterian Christians.

No one puts new wine in old wineskins Jesus once said. It is surely the clearest thing he ever said. No tradition survives which does not always seek new ways to be expressed and celebrated.

T. S. Eliot wrote an essay about tradition once in which he said that

> "tradition is not something you inherit ... if you want tradition you must obtain it with great labor. You must obtain it with intellectual toil, existential engagement, contestation and interrogation." [See Cornell West in *Criterion,* University of Chicago Divinity School, Spring/Summer, 1994]

There are many ways to be faithful. There are many ways to respond to Christ's call to discipleship. Presbyterianism is one, not the only one. But it is ours, yours and mine for a while: to enjoy, celebrate, and employ in the way we work out our own vocations. And, along with all the other unique church traditions, this one, I think, is to be appreciated and respected. It is a gift to us to be handed on to others, generation to generation. Amen.